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### STAGE DEVICES

IT is not far from forty years since I paid my first visit to the dramatic museum of the Paris Opera, then newly housed in the left wing of the sumptuous edifice—the wing originally designed to provide a private entrance for the deposed Napoleon III. There in a narrow passageway were models of a dozen of the most striking sets which had been painted for the masterpieces of the music-drama in the preceding half century; and there, in a broad and spacious gallery, were models of stage machinery, sketches for costumes, playbills, ancient and modern, autograph letters of famous composers, and original manuscript scores of a few of the long sequence of famous operas written specially for the French National Academy of Music. The founder of the museum of the opera was Charles Nutter; and he was kind enough to serve as my guide and to call my attention to the most interesting exhibits.

As was natural we fell into talk about the history of scene painting and about the modern elaboration of scenic effect and mechanical device; and in the course of our conversation M. Nutter sent for a tall and stately time full of engraved illustrations.

"We are inclined to pride ourselves," he said to me, "on our modern improvements and most of us are likely to believe that our predecessors of the last century could not compete with us in the ingenuity and in the complexity of the effects we can now produce on the stage."

OUT if you will examine this book, Sabbatini's 'Art of Making Scenery and Theatrical Machines,' published in Italian in 1638 at Ravenna you will discover that there has been little advance in the past two and a half centuries. Those Italians could do then almost everything that we can do now on the stage of the opera. For example, look at this plate; and you will see that they were prepared to exhibit a full rigged ship, to bring it on under sail, and to make it manoeuvre in front of the spectators. We could scarcely do it any better nowadays; and we should have to do it very much in the same way. In one thing, and in one thing only, have we an indisputable advantage over the Italian painter-engineers whose inventiveness has been commemorated by Sabbatini. We have artificial light and an abundance of it, while they were dependent either upon daylight or upon the wholly inadequate illumination of sputtering candles and of smoking oil lamps."

In this last remark M. Nutter pointed out the essential difference between the modern theatre since Moliere's time and all earlier theatres, those in ancient Greece and Rome and those in Renaissance Italy, in the England of Elizabeth and in the Spain of Philip. All these earlier playhouses had to give their performances by daylight; and most of their spectators were exposed to the sun and the rain. And even in Moliere's time, and in fact until the in-

roduction of gas early in the nineteenth century, the lighting of the stage was pitifully insufficient. In fact we might go further and maintain that there was no wholly satisfactory means of theatrical illumination until the invention of the electric light toward the end of the nineteenth century,—although the introduction of the calcium light a few years earlier had made possible not a few effects unattainable by gas alone.

When we consider the extraordinary variety and the subtle delicacy of the methods of applying the electric light as these have been developed in the first quarter of the twentieth century, we are inclined to doubt whether the stage managers of a century ago, of three centuries ago and of twenty centuries ago could have achieved anything fairly entitled to be called spectacle, as we use the word.

But the audiences of those distant days were unable to foresee our modern appliances; they could not miss what they did not know; and these ancestors of ours were delighted by devices which were perfectly satisfactory to them even if they could strike us today as painfully primitive and absurdly inadequate. Indeed, it is interesting to discover that they often attempted in their unroofed playhouses effects not unlike those to which we are accustomed in our well-lighted theatres.

There is the so called Flying Ballet, for example, in which dancers, suspended by invisible wires, float ethereally across the stage almost as though they were birds or butterflies. Yet the Greeks more than twenty centuries ago had a simpler device, not exactly equivalent to this but not altogether unlike it. When one of their adroit dramatists desired to have a God descend from the sky, he made use of what was then known as the "machine." Apparently this was nothing more than a basket, appropriately decorated to look like a chariot, which was hoisted by a rope over a pulley and then lowered to allow the unexpected deity to step down among the other actors standing in the orchestra.

Another Greek anticipation of a modern effect is the "ekkeklemma," which brought before the eyes of the enthralled spectators something supposed to have taken place out of sight. In the "Agamemnon" of Aeschylus, Clytemnestra goes into her palace to murder her husband with the aid of her paramour, Aegisthus. After an interval of dread anticipation the audience heard the cry of the murdered man; and then the wide central doors of the palace were thrown open and a little platform was thrust forward on which the spectators could behold the corpse of Agamemnon with his assassin wife standing over him.—Brander Matthews in Theatre Magazine.

It is said that New York tenpin experts soon will begin to tour the alleys of the country. One does grow frightfully tired of the alleys of New York.



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